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SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA COMMEMORATES THE VELVET REVOLUTION: SNAPSHOTS FROM  
A CONFLICTED ANNIVERSARY

REF: PRAGUE 677; BRATISLAVA 484; BRATISLAVA 466

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Introduction and Summary: Last week's 20th anniversary commemorations of the Velvet Revolution underscored the deep, fundamental divisions that exist within Slovak politics and society. Senior government officials trumpeted Slovakia's post-1989 successes: independence from the Czechs, EU and NATO membership, even the 2002 world ice hockey championships. But they refuse to embrace the cause or spirit of the anti-communist revolution itself; some even make a point of distancing themselves it. The political opposition's voice -- having just lost badly in regional elections -- was effectively marginalized. Former dissidents and student activists -- many of whom have given up on elective politics -- tried to focus contemporary Slovak society's attention more directly on the true meaning of November 17, but -- absent any significant government support -- were forced to hold a series of disparate, sometimes competing events. And even these lacked a consistent, unifying theme, as Slovak society remained ambivalent, almost schizophrenic, in its response to the anniversary. Competing surveys painted a confused, sometimes contradictory portrait of how the Velvet Revolution is perceived twenty years after the collapse of the CSSR's communist regime. End Introduction/Summary.

[12](#). (U) Slovak commemorations of the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution (translated as 'Gentle' Revolution here) encompassed a number of disparate, sometimes competing events over the past few weeks. Embassy Bratislava officers and FSNs attended as many as we could, provided financial support to some (e.g., the Central European Forum, the 'Voices from the Center' internet-based project), and followed others via the media and word of mouth. What follows are our impressionist snapshots from various events, some of which left us uplifted, others perplexed, and some even disappointed.

Snapshot from November 18 (evening): Vaclav Havel Reminisces with his Slovak Colleagues

13. (U) As Vaclav Havel arrives at Bratislava's Old National Theater he is greeted by a standing ovation from the packed house that has come to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution with which he is so closely and personally associated. Havel joins a dozen Slovaks -- they were dissidents, students, artists in 1989 -- who had helped organize and lead the anti-communist, pro-democracy demonstrations in Bratislava (where, knowledgeable Slovaks proudly point out, the first anti-government march took place on November 16, one day before the initial student-police clashes in Prague). Reminiscing about their experiences as dissidents, revolutionaries, and then ex-dissidents suddenly and unexpectedly thrust into government and public administration, the panelists underscore their shared commitment to the ideals of freedom and democracy, many taking subtle -- and often not-so-subtle -- jabs at the current Slovak government's perceived anti-democratic tendencies. The audience responds enthusiastically.

Snapshot from November 13 (midday): Paska Vents his Anger, Fico Recalls his Honeymoon

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14. (U) At a government-organized 'scientific' conference on the revolution -- boycotted by most actual participants in the demonstrations of 1989 -- Slovak Parliament Speaker Paska lashes out angrily at those who have objected to his inviting former Czechoslovak Communist Party officials to be part of the commemorative events. On former dissident compares it to asking old fascists to participate in the annual commemoration of the anti-Nazi Slovak National Uprising. At the same event, Prime Minister Fico recalls that some things were, indeed, better back then, such as stipends for university students. While acknowledging that it's now easier to travel internationally, he also points out that getting permission to travel was still possible in the old days. For example, he got the go-ahead to take his honeymoon in Malta, using money he had saved from his generous stipend as a law student. It's left to others to point out that it he was helped by his membership in the Czechoslovak Communist Party, given that his loyalty was never under suspicion.

Snapshot from November 17 (dusk): Unveiling a Barbed Wire Heart

15. (U) On Hviezdoslavovo Square, between the Old National Theater and the American Embassy, former dissidents and student leaders gather for an event hosted by the mayor of Bratislava. On the order of 1000 onlookers turn out for one of the few free, public events being held to both commemorate the Velvet Revolution and also honor the victims of communism. After a few short, moving speeches a sculpture is unveiled. Fashioned from old metal I-beams and rusty barbed wire, the piece is shaped like a heart. It is roughly 15 feet high and 12 feet across. It is meant to symbolize several concepts: the barbed-wire frontier that once ran through the heart of Europe; those who tried to flee across the iron curtain and were captured and imprisoned or -- in too many cases -- gunned down; and a new Europe in which Slovakia is -- geographically at least -- at the heart, the center, but with a history that all of Europe's diverse citizens need to remember. After the unveiling, many Slovaks light candles and leave them burning at the foot of the sculpture, just as they do at their relatives' graves on All Souls' Day.

Snapshot from November 17 and 18 (all day): Forum on Past, Present, and Future

16. (U) The Central European Forum -- sponsored by a Slovak NGO -- plays host to a two-day conference on the legacy of 1989, not just in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, but throughout Europe. President Havel and Polish writer Adam Michnik participate on the 18th, American philanthropist Wendy Luers and Russian writer Viktor Erofeyev on the 17th, and other figures from dissident movements in neighboring countries are sprinkled among the various panels. Speakers forthrightly acknowledge that the transitions had not always been smooth and that much democracy-building remains to be accomplished, but they all share the underlying assumption that the switch from one-party rule to democracy has been a positive development. Slovak panelists tend to contrast this common assumption with their perception that many current Slovak political figures simply do

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not share this fundamentally positive approach to the legacy of 1989.

Snapshot from November 17 (midday): Into the Lion's Den

17. (C) In recent years, either the U.S. Ambassador or DCM has accepted an invitation to speak to the youth wing of HZDS (the party of notorious ex-Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar) at their annual November 17 convention. Because the youth wing of HZDS has been associated with the more moderate MP Milan Urbani

rather than Meciar and his cronies, we have used these sessions to encourage these young politicians in a more democratic, less authoritarian direction. As the Charge arrives today, a young woman is vigorously asserting that Slovak society is much worse off now than it was before 1989 -- jobs are no longer guaranteed, housing is too expensive for young couples, too many students take drugs. The following speaker takes strong issue with her, arguing that she has neglected to recall the realities of the communist era -- secret police snooping into your personal business, the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, the inability to travel where you want, when you want. The Charge is up next; he underscores that a free press, an independent judiciary, respect for minorities, and cooperation with NGOs are key elements of democratic society. All are bugaboos to Meciar. The next day we learn that Urbani -- sponsor of the HZDS youth wing -- is being forced out of the party.

#### Snapshot for November 17: The 'Opposition' Event

18. (U) Unlike the awkward and sparsely attended government gala, the opposition concert commemorating November 1989, held in the old National Theater, attracted a standing-room-only crowd and several 1989 activists. The music was excellent and the retrospectives moving, but this was, first and foremost, a contemporary political event. The Chairmen of the main opposition parties, Mikulas Dzurinda (SDKU), Jan Figel (KDH), and Pal Csaky (SMK), used the occasion to contrast the ideals and hopes of 1989 with the Slovak political reality of 2009. They decried corruption, clientilism, vulgarity, and intolerance, and essentially urged the audience (their natural audience) to 'kick the bums out.' If one didn't know how dismally the opposition had just performed in the regional elections only a few days before (ref B), one might have mistaken the politicians' seeming brio and the convivial spirit of the evening as a sign of genuine momentum for political renewal.

Snapshot from November 17 (morning): Prime Minister Fico in London

19. (U) Arriving from Moscow -- where he spent November 16 meeting with Russian energy bigwigs and having lunch with Prime Minister Putin -- Slovak Prime Minister Fico speaks to a London

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university audience. In comments that receive the most attention here, he suggests that many of those who led the Velvet Revolution had self-serving personal agendas and subsequently benefited financially from the post-communist governments' various privatization schemes. Commentators respond that those who profited most from the privatization

weren't the revolutionaries, but the party functionaries who had the best connections with Meciar and his government, many of whom are now the financial sponsors of Fico's own Smer party.

Snapshot from November 19 (evening): A Portal to the Past

¶10. (U) At a small gathering in a small bookshop, American Janeil Engelstad -- a former Fulbright Fellow here -- introduces her web-based project 'Voices from the Center' ([www.voicesfromthecenter.net](http://www.voicesfromthecenter.net)). Engelstad has interviewed 'average people' (if there is such a thing) in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary about their experiences during and after the revolutions of 1989, and the web site includes their commentary and impressions. Not all are 100 percent positive -- one architect laments the relative freedom he had under the old regime, for example, that is limited now by the market -- but most convey the notion that an open society is a better place in which to live, even if there are some negatives. Engelstad participates in similar openings in Zilina on November 17 and Kosice on November 23.

Snapshot from November 17 (evening):

¶11. (U) Prime Minister Fico has returned from his Moscow/London trip in time to attend a 'Gala Evening' organized by Parliament Speaker Paska at the New National Theater in honor of the anniversary. President Gasparovic is there, along with senior parliamentarians from the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Poland. The audience is small; organizers have to move part of the diplomatic into the center section to give TV viewers the impression that the hall is more crowded than it really is. The hostess of this televised gala is an attractive young entertainer in a low-cut evening gown with lots of sparkles. Acts include:

-- a Village People-like group performing a modern dance routine while singing a medley of tunes that were popular 'back then' (as the hostess keeps referring to 1989);

-- a well-known opera singer performing a Puccini aria while a couple performs a romantic slow dance;

-- a Slovak folk ensemble performing a Tatras mountain dance; and

-- a soft-rock band singing a popular song from 1989 (and that was actually sung on Wenceslas Square in Prague during the anti-communist demonstrations).

During some of the performances, old video footage from 1989 was

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shown in the background, but it was largely crowd shots that avoided focusing on any of the popular leaders of the revolution; Havel appeared in one quick scene, Slovak Jan Budaj, a co-founder of Public Against Violence, briefly in another. None of the revolution's leaders attended, and the very few references made to 1989 tended to focus on Slovakia's success since then -- gaining independence, joining NATO and the EU, and winning the 2002 world ice hockey championships. Paska was the only government official to speak, and he limited his remarks to welcoming his foreign guests while paying only a very generic tribute to the Slovaks who participated in the 1989 revolution.

¶12. (C) Following the event, the Czech ambassador described it as 'a disaster,' that essentially presented the communist era as a sort of innocent variety show. The Swedish ambassador -- who had served in Prague in the mid-1980s -- said he was appalled, a statement with which the Dutch ambassador (a veteran of Moscow) readily concurred. Our impression was that the government had felt compelled to do something to recognize the anniversary, and had managed to put together an evening of song-and-dance that filled the minimum air-time required without offering any substantive endorsement of the 1989 freedom agenda of Vaclav Havel or Slovakia's own Public Against Violence umbrella organization.

Snapshot from November 17: The 'Real' Opposition Event

¶13. (U) The organizer of the famous Slovak summer music festival, Pohoda, assembled a November 17 event that highlighted the work of non-governmental organizations and youth. Held at Bratislava's beloved 'PKO' -- the communist-era recreational center which was the only venue for pop concerts before 1989 -- the crowd was large and buoyant. One of the highlights was the annual 'White Crow' awards ceremony, created by a consortium of NGOs to recognize courageous individuals. Among this year's winners were a group of judges outspoken in their defense of judicial ethics and independence. The stars of the evening, however, were communist era underground bands, including the 'Plastic People of the Universe,' whose pre-1989 lyrics managed to befuddle the censors while conveying their messages loudly and clearly to the youth of the day.

¶14. (U) We had been told by several 1989 figures that they would prefer to celebrate 'pohoda' style, as opposed to participating in more overtly political events. Thus, the overwhelmingly youthful PKO audience was dotted with gray-haired 1989 veterans, too. Against the backdrop of raucous music, the mezzanine of the PKO hosted packed panel discussions on the state of the judiciary, the environment and manipulation of public opinion. The juxtaposition of dignified 60-something judges with youthful students and contemporary good-governance activists was striking. Of all of the November 17 events, the

PKO celebration seemed the most authentic in its embrace of 1989 -- the music, the absence of politicians, and the abundance of young people who seemed ready to embrace any number of causes.

#### Embassy Comment and Conclusion

¶15. (C) We knew the week of November 17 commemorations would expose a vast political and moral divide -- at least among Slovak political elites (ref C) -- but we hadn't quite predicted just how clumsily the Fico government would play its part. From

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the Prime Minister's November 16 visit to Moscow for a meeting with Vladimir Putin, to the repeated attacks by Fico and Paska on the intellectuals, on those who would seek to 'privatize the memory of November 17,' and on the 'prostituting' media, the leading administration figures seemed defensive, angry, and maladroit. Perhaps it was understandable. Fico and company were between a rock and a hard place: how to commemorate an event they hadn't wished for and which many of their supporters and friends (not least Mr. Putin) view as a prelude to the worst event in the 20th century? To make matters worse (and the real cause of Paska's pique) no principled Velvet Revolution figures would give them cover by participating in their official 'gala.'

¶16. (C) Living in Bratislava, the one remaining bastion of liberal politics (at least in the classic European sense), one would be tempted to conclude that the November 17 commemorations -- disparate though they may have been -- might spur an impulse among society to look critically at the quality of Slovak democracy after 20 years. That would be a mistake. Similar to their Czech cousins (ref A), Slovaks are largely cynical about domestic politics. And public opinion surveys suggest an almost schizophrenic view of the legacy of 1989: 81 percent of Slovaks support democratic government, but only 29 percent see themselves as 'better off' today than under the communist government; 77 percent see reason to 'be proud of' their country, but 42 percent believe corruption and cronyism have grown worse in recent years. Nevertheless, the results of the regional elections demonstrate clearly that voters remain content enough with the Smer brand of governance to give Prime Minister Fico's party another victory. The real heroes of 1989 and their ideological heirs remain -- much to their surprise and chagrin -- on the outside looking in.

EDDINS